

State of Connecticut
GENERAL ASSEMBLY



COMMISSION ON CHILDREN

CONNECTICUT COMMISSION ON CHILDREN
Minutes of Meeting

Legislative Office Building, Room 2-A
Hartford, Connecticut

Tuesday, November 15, 2005
10:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.

Voting members present: Judith A. Busch, James P. Cordier, Representative Andrew M. Fleischmann, Dr. Alex Geertsma, Senator Mary Ann Handley, Laura Lee Simon, Leslie Wolfgang and John Yrchik.

Ex officio members (or designees) present: Department of Education (Charlene Russell-Tucker), Department of Correction (Patrick Hynes), Department of Children and Families (Debra J. Korta), Department of Mental Retardation (Commissioner Peter O'Meara) and Department of Social Services (Grace Whitney).

Members absent: Joseph Clary, Office of Policy and Management (Anne Foley), Mary Fox, Department of Public Health (Norma Gyle), Alison Hilding, Representative Michael Lawlor, Judge Michael Mack, Senator Christopher Murphy, Attorney General (Susan Pearlman), Josh Piteo and Mary Grace Reed.

Guests: Kameo Parks, Jay Salvador, Peter Eio, Julie Stern, Sandy Barry, Representative Marie Lopez Kirkley-Bey, Julie Bisi, Ann Dandorw, and Theresa Nicholson.

Commission staff present: Elaine Zimmerman, Thomas Brooks, Elizabeth Brown, Patricia Estill, Kevin Flood, Dawn Homer-Bouthiette, Rachel Levy and Edie Luciano.

Handouts: Agenda; Minutes for September 13, 2005, List of 2006 Commission meetings, Connecticut's Uprooted and Displaced Children, American Red Cross toy distribution and News Bulletin on Oct. 14, 2005 with Elaine Zimmerman and State Representative Gail Hamm, Interval House letter dated October 16, 2005 thank you to our agency for donation of toys, State of CT Child Poverty Council report, LEAD agenda for upcoming meeting on November 17, 2005, DPH flyer on Connecticut Obesity Stakeholders Meeting on November 18, 2005 and Save the Date Invitation for Submission of Student Art and Writing on December 6, 2005.

Meeting Convened

Chair James Cordier called the meeting to order at 10:05 a.m.

The hurricanes that devastated the Gulf Coast of the United States in August and September of 2005 mobilized Connecticut: Many residents opened their homes to evacuees, while others donated money, goods, and services. In the course of distributing donated toys and other comfort items to children who arrived here as a result of the hurricanes, state officials recognized a growing need to help Connecticut's own uprooted and displaced children.

On Tuesday, November 15, 2005, the Connecticut Commission on Children held a public forum to discuss the plight of these children. The focus fell primarily on homeless children, child poverty, family displacement and loss for foster children.

The forum—entitled, “Not a Hurricane, but Still a Disaster: A Discussion of Connecticut’s Uprooted and Displaced Children”—revealed that behind the typical homeless child is a parent or parents hamstrung for lack of the tools needed to make an adequate living, particularly education, job training, transportation, access to day care, and access to health care. But even parents with jobs—a growing portion of the homeless—find themselves on the street or one step away from it because they cannot find housing that is affordable, let alone large enough to accommodate their families.

Structural to systemic factors came under discussion including racism, low expectations of homeless adults, and a failure of resources to reach homeless parents as a result of changes over the last decade in the welfare system.

<p>Fact: In any 12-month period, 13,000 children will experience homelessness in this state, the one almost reflexively described as the richest in the union. (Source: Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness.)</p>
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Housing: Too expensive, too small

More than any other factor, panelists pointed to the lack of affordable housing in Connecticut as a cause of child homelessness. “There’s simply not enough affordable housing in our area for families—for *growing* families,” said Theresa Nicholson, assistant vice president for clinical services at the Community Renewal Team of Greater Hartford. At its 40-bed shelter in East Hartford, CRT served 600 families last year—and had to turn away 300 more, according to Nicholson. She attributed part of that to the growing size of families seeking shelter. Just as these families found no room at the shelter, they found no room in the housing market. “With families of five or six,” Nicholson said, “it’s very difficult to put them in two-bedroom apartments.”

The housing market is squeezing out poor families from several sides, panelists noted: Most new construction isn’t aimed at their needs, the existing rental units are becoming more expensive, and many units are simply disappearing. Rep. Marie Kirkley-Bey of Hartford blamed the latter on the dismantling of public housing projects, explaining they contained multi-bedroom apartments that aren’t being replaced.

Fact: In 2004, every tenth child in Connecticut belonged to a family living below the federal poverty level, which was \$19,307 for a family of four. The ratio was the same in 2003. (Source: Connecticut Voices for Children, using U.S. Census data.)

No home, no school

Another refrain of the forum: the devastating effect homelessness has on a child's education. Too often, panelists said, a child without a permanent home becomes a child without a permanent school. Moving from to shelter to shelter, or from relative to relative, means switching schools with alarming frequency. "We've had experiences with children who start at one school in September, go on to three or four different schools, and end up back at the first school by May," said State Children's Advocate Jeanne Millstein. Such instability can't help but hinder an education, panelists said.

Lack of medical care

Dr. Alex Geertsma, director of the Children's Health Center at St. Mary's Hospital in Waterbury, spoke of the similar effect transience has on health care. Homeless children "are at the highest risk of discontinued care, for a multitude of reasons—loss of jobs, loss of insurance coverage, confusion over coverage." Rather than being sent to the emergency room of the nearest hospital in times of emergency, he added, homeless children should be entitled to ongoing, preventive care that addresses their long-term needs.

When homeless children go without schooling altogether, particularly at the pre-school level, the long-term effects become most damaging, several panelists said. "You can see where they've lacked so much in pre-school education," remarked Ann Dandrow of the A.J. Pappanikou Center for Developmental Disabilities at the University of Connecticut. She warned of the social costs of letting these children enter society as unprepared adults: "We're going to pay one way or another, and isn't it better to prevent than trying to undo something?"

Fact: Homeless children are more likely than others to suffer mental-health problems such as anxiety and depression and to exhibit behavioral problems, ranging from sleep disorders to developmental delays. (Source: National Alliance to End Homelessness.)

McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act

Charlene Tucker of the state Department of Education suggested potential source of help in educating homeless children: the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. Among its provisions, she said, is one that provides federal assistance in educating homeless children in their original school districts. Panelists agreed to utilize the MVHAC.

Currently, Connecticut utilizes the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act for children that are of school-age.

Representative Andrew Fleischmann of West Hartford urged greater focus on supportive housing, in which parents who make the transition to permanent housing are assigned case workers to assist with household budgeting and other skills to ensure the family doesn't slip back into homelessness.

'Systemic' issues

Behind the most obvious causes of child homelessness are others that lie much deeper in the fabric of society and need addressing. Sen. Mary Ann Handley of Manchester identified two of these: racism and low expectations among the groups most likely to be afflicted by homelessness. She illustrated the latter by recalling some data she had seen on teenage pregnancy. It indicated a strong correlation, she said, between a girl's likelihood of becoming pregnant and her expectations about going to college. "If she expects to go to college," Hanley said, "she doesn't get pregnant."

Elaine Zimmerman, Executive Director of the Commission on Children, underscored Handley's point about racism by referring to the 2005 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) report for Connecticut, which showed 58 percent of African-American fourth-graders failing to reach even the basic performance level in reading and 55 percent of Hispanic fourth-graders doing the same.

If the state continues to ignore the "systemic issues" of racism and low expectations, Hanley said, "we're never going to get anywhere."

Another underlying factor identified by several panelists was the revamping of Connecticut's welfare system in the 1990s. Representative Kirkley-Bey called it a leading contributor to homelessness, contending that the current cut-off of benefits after 39 weeks leaves many clients with too little time to acquire meaningful job skills and find jobs that pay well enough to support their families. There is a direct link between uprooted children and homeless adults.

Foster children: Our future homeless population?

The panel also heard a presentation from Kameo Parks, youth coordinator for Connecticut Voices for Children, on the difficulties faced by older children in state foster care. Just at the age where continuing their education and acquiring job skills has become crucial, it's at this point where the system begins to ignore them, Parks said.

Elaine Zimmerman said the statistics bear out Parks' point: 54 percent of teens in foster care fail to complete high school, 30 percent have no access to health care, and 25 percent become homeless.

Indeed, through inadequate attention to children in foster care, Connecticut is creating its next generation of homeless people, Parks argued. “The age group of 14 to 23 is where we lose our children,” she said. “They’re not graduating from high school. They’re not going on to college. How are we preparing these youth to be successful, working adults?” It’s too late, she said, when these children “age out of foster care and realize that their job at K-Mart, working 60 hours or possibly 80 hours, can’t pay the rent.”

The consequences of inaction

Repeatedly, panelists noted that the longer a child lives in homelessness, the greater the damage to his or her development. Just the condition of homelessness eats at a child’s sense of wellbeing, according to CRT’s Nicholson. “It’s very difficult for a child to live in a homeless shelter,” she said. “Think about it: If the rules change every day, how do you know what to expect when you wake up in the morning?”

University of Connecticut’s Ann Dandrow summed it up this way: “It’s fear that’s the biggest factor for these kids. There is no stability in their lives.”

The group agreed to look further at policies that reduce and prevent child poverty, housing and youth foster care.

Closing

Mr. Cordier closed the meeting at 12:10 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John Yrchik". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "John" being more prominent than the last name "Yrchik".

John Yrchik
Secretary